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SUBJECT Pelton Spy Trial/CIA Pressure on the News Media

DAN LEWIS: Opening arguments in the Ronald Pelton spy trial are expected to begin Tuesday. Pelton is accused of selling U.S. secrets to the Soviet Union. He was arrested in November. Jury selection is continuing today in the federal trial in Baltimore. That process is expected to be completed tomorrow.

The judge has ordered the jury to be sequestered beginning next Tuesday. The judge also is weighing a media request for access to some wire-tap conversations involving Pelton. Prosecutors argue that making the tapes public would be a breach of national security.

Well, the CIA is angry about some news reports concerning the Pelton trial. The pressure that agency is placing on the media is the subject of Bob Levy's commentary tonight.

A BOB LEVY: If you ask William Casey, it's all the news media's fault. A man sells secrets to the Russians, the media want to report on that as the Constitution gives them the right to do, but the CIA director leans on a major newspaper and a major TV network claiming that they have either compromised or might compromise national security. But the damage was done long before William Casey started leaning, and the person who's making it worse is not any reporter but Casey himself.

When Ronald Pelton sold the Russians information about an American spy system, the Russians could not be sure that they were buying honest information. After all, the two super powers try to trick each other all the time. The Russians had to wonder if they were buying the hi-tech equivalent of the Trojan horse.

But as soon as William Casey tried to get heavy with the

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media, it was obvious to the Russians that Pelton had sold them something of real value. You would think a top spy like Casey would have learned the value of silence. Obviously, he hasn't.

The media that have the Pelton story were not about to publish anything the Russians didn't already have. This wasn't the same as deciding whether to reveal troop movements during a war. This was basic bread and butter reporting about a man named Pelton who was about to stand trial in an open American courtroom.

Sure the information he sold was sensitive, but it was sensitive in the sense of being embarrassing, not in the sense that publicity would make an intelligence leak any worse.

The major long-term result of William Casey's actions will be to intimidate the news media. That will have just as serious an effect on national security as anything Ronald Pelton ever did.

I'm Bob Levy, with a commentary.